Naturalism versus Philosophy?

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> With regard to the relationship of philosophy and the empirical sciences, we have remarked that philosophy does not in any way compete with the sciences. It does not make any speculative assertions which could conflict with the speculative assertions of science, nor does it profess to venture into fields which lie beyond the scope of scientific investigation. Only the metaphysician does that, and produces nonsense as a result[1].

There seems to be something odd about being a philosopher and a naturalist, since if science can give an account of every aspect of the world, then what is the point of doing philosophy? And if philosophy is not concerned with giving an account of the world, what is the point of being a naturalist in philosophy? The formulation is paradoxical enough to make us suspect that it means more than it conveys at the first glance. But because each of its conditionals points to something generally accepted, the astonishing effect of the sentence remains.

Indeed, on the one hand, science, for reasons irrelevant here – and probably impossible to exhaust – has become, in the twentieth century, the sole oracle for questions concerning the world and its furnishings. While of course not compulsory, this view entails a kind of naturalism which professes that everything in existence exists within the realm of nature, and that beyond nature there is nothing.

[1] AYER, 1936, p.168.

This thesis is the core of ontological naturalism. And since science, and its methods, laws, and descriptions provide our only access to nature – this is the core idea of methodological naturalism – no investigation could give an acceptable account of the physical world, or of life, human nature and suchlike beyond that of science. Accordingly, if philosophy was capable of delivering any useful answers to meaningful questions concerning the world, than it would have to be understood as science, and, as such, to be committed to ontological as well as to methodological naturalism.

On the other hand, it is not unusual to take philosophy as a kind of discourse that is irreducible to a description of what there is. A discourse about discourses; a metadiscourse to which even science, and perhaps especially science, has to be subjected. In this sense, philosophy is not *prima facie* about the world, but is about our knowledge of the world. This does not place philosophy outside of nature, but does grant it a particular role in the acquisition of knowledge, or even in the organization of the knowledge science can deliver. In order to make this view more tangible, I want to give two defences of this conception of philosophy, both from philosophers of the analytical tradition and both very much committed to not opposing science and philosophy. The first comes from Ayer, in a passage that follows the one quoted above. Ayer clearly points out the special role played by philosophy, as he sees it, which regards the acquisition of knowledge:

> And we have also pointed out that it is impossible merely by philosophizing to determine the validity of a coherent system of scientific propositions. For the question whether such a system is valid is always a question of empirical fact; and, therefore, the propositions of philosophy, since they are purely linguistic propositions, can have no bearing upon it. Thus the philosopher is not, qua philosopher, in a position to assess the value of any scientific theory; his function in

> simply to elucidate the theory by defining the symbols which accur in it[2].

Now, if philosophy is a kind of metadiscourse we can apply to elucidate theories and, therefore, to elucidate science itself, how can it make sense to use a naturalistic approach in philosophy? Would it make sense to try to "defin[e] the symbols which occur [in science]" by means of a naturalistic method? What exactly would it mean to do so? To define symbols empirically, for example, by merely describing the way people, especially scientists, use theoretical concepts? And if so, why shouldn't that task concern linguistics rather than philosophers? The second defence I want to present is related to the role philosophy could play in organizing scientific knowledge as a unified whole, as Dennett proposes in *Freedom Evolves* (2003) when declaring himself a naturalist:

> My fundamental perspective is naturalism, the idea that philosophical investigations are not superior to, or prior to, investigations in the natural sciences, but in partnership with those truth-seeking enterprise, and that the proper job for philosophers here is to clarify and unify the often warring perspectives into a single vision of the universe[3].

How could philosophy fulfil such a unifying task by means of a naturalistic approach? Let me ask again the question put to Ayer: is it by using some empirical procedure? By describing the way each "warring perspective" pleads its case? This, of course, would simply give us the theories again, not a unified version of them. Or should clarification and unification only be done with logical tools? Would that even be possible? And if not, why shouldn't scientist be also concerned with this task as much as philosophers?

It is clear that hidden in the paradox of philosophical naturalism is a complex relationship between science and philosophy. The problem of articulating these two enterprises harmoniously has

[2] AYER, 1936, p.168.
[3] DENNETT, 2003, p.13–15.

obvious historical constrains and determinations, and is far less clear than it need to be to answer our questions. Debate over their relationship, however, has taken a more manageable direction since Quine published his essay "*Epistemology Naturalized*" (1969), where he defends the idea that epistemology succeeded metaphysics as the main philosophical contributor to science after the Vienna Circle criticized the latter as nonsensical, and claims that epistemology should be performed within the limits of psychology and, therefore, as a natural science.

Quine does not deny philosophy a role in the acquisition of knowledge. Nevertheless, by analysing and assuming the failure of "deducing science from sense data"[4], which was part of classical empiricism and logical empiricism, whose pinnacle was Carnap's monumental effort in *Der logische Aufbau der Welt* (1928) to reduce discourse about bodies to sense data, Quine has given up any philosophical desideratum of delivering in epistemology anything further than that which science can provide. He says: "We are after an understanding of science as an institution or process in the world, and we do not intend that understanding to be any better than the science which is its object"[5].

If, however, there is a role that philosophy and philosophy alone could play alongside science in the acquisition of human knowledge, what that role would be is not clear in Quine's essay. That there is or not such a role for philosophy is, as I hope will become clear in this paper, a crucial question regarding the relationship between philosophy and the sciences in general, and with naturalism in particular. The intense debate Quine's essay has provoked shows us that approximating philosophy to naturalism is, for many, to threaten the former inasmuch as it is to approximate philosophy to science, because the science under consideration is natural science, or science done experimentally. If there is a role with regards to human knowledge that is unique to philosophy, then we shouldn't identify

[4] QUINE, 1969, p.84.
[5] QUINE, 1969, p.84.

philosophy with the natural sciences, and would therefore avoid naturalizing philosophy.

Naturalization of philosophy here means bringing philosophy and natural science close together and, therefore, committing philosophy to ontological and methodological naturalism in the same way that natural sciences are committed to these metaphysical principles. Natural science is committed to the belief that, first, all there is is immanent to the world, and, second, the means we have to access what there is are of the same metaphysical nature of the things we want to know, namely, they are immanent to the world and susceptible to the same constraints, laws, and mutual determinations. But this does not entail that science can be sure of its accomplishments. Of course science must be committed to certainty, but not to being certain of the results at which it arrives. Quite the opposite! This last principle, which we can call the principle of doubt, also holds for the formal sciences, regardless of how one chooses to interpret their connection to the world. David Berlinski, a critic of evolutionism who also criticizes the alleged scientific basis for atheism, describes scientific pretensions in a way that no longer corresponds to what science is entitled to seek. Interestingly, in doing so, he offers, unwillingly, a perfectly scientifically unacceptable attitude regarding science. In his book of 2009, *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions*, he asks: "What remains of the ideology of the sciences?"[6]. And answers: "It is the thesis that the sciences are true – who would doubt it? – and that *only* the sciences are true." Of course, it is the job of science to doubt that science is true, inasmuch as it is its job to be committed to certainty and to reject that certainty could be achieved by means of supernatural resources. There is no contradiction here, because science is performed collectively, so that assertion and doubt are performed by different players at different times – but still, all the time! Therefore, although it is crucial for scientists to doubt and to

[6] BERLINSKI, 2009, p.59.

challenge the truths of science, science is *the* activity of search for truth by immanent means, whatever they might be.

The cartesian ideal of a science that would progress truth by truth may have had a model in the mathematics, but not even there could it be vindicated. This recognition is central to Quine's argument in "Naturalized Epistemology", and to his proposal that we ask philosophy to work more closely with natural science. The project of founding mathematics, which gained new impetus with Frege's logic at the end of the nineteenth century, collapsed through Gödel's work. As Quine puts it:

> Moreover, we know from Gödel's work that no consistent axiom system can cover mathematics even when we renounce self-evidence. Reduction in the foundations of mathematics remains mathematically and philosophically fascinating, but it does not do what the epistemologist would like of it: is does not reveal the ground of mathematical knowledge, it does not show how mathematical certainty is possible[7].

Quine classifies studies in the foundation of mathematics into two sorts: conceptual studies and doctrinal studies: "conceptual studies are concerned with meaning, the doctrinal with truth"[8]. The foundationalist project went wrong when conceptual studies in the foundation of mathematics, whose goal was to reduce mathematical terms into logical terms, failed, and the reduction of those terms into set theory terms did not give a higher degree of certainty. Reductions produced clarity, but no proof of mathematical certainty. Clarification by means of translating one theory into another (arithmetic to logic or to set theory), therefore, did not result in better conditions for deducting one truth from another in any discipline. This was the goal of the doctrinal part of foundationalism, as Quine defines it: "The doctrinal studies are concerned with establishing laws by proving them, some on the basis of others"[9]. The Cartesian

[7] QUINE, 1969, p.70.
[8] QUINE, 1969, p.69.
[9] QUINE, 1969, p.69s.

ideal was in check precisely where it could have been most successful, namely, in mathematics.

A similar bicephalous program, oriented to meaning and truth at once, can also be applied to natural science. Quine does just this, and the result is equivalent. His focus is Carnap's efforts in the *Aufbau*. While it is shown that translations from discourse about bodies into discourse about sense data can be partially successful, and can bring some clarity in the process, no similar progress in the generalization of sensory-based knowledge could be made. In the case of natural sciences, the goal of the doctrinal part would consist in "justifying our knowledge of truths of nature in sensory terms"[10]. Here, Quine argues, we are still where Hume left us. He states: "On the doctrinal side, I do not see that we are farther along today than where Hume left us. The Humean predicament is the human predicament. But on the conceptual side there has been progress"[11]. The conclusion is that in the theory of meaning some advances can be ensured, but when it comes to the theory of truth, none are assured. It is, however, important to specify what exactly is still missing on the side of the truth. We require neither a definition of truth, nor a semantical approach to it, but a way of warranting progress from one truth to another. The ideal of moving one certainty at a time, either by deductive procedure, or by some sort of induction, failed.

Quine's conclusion that no Archimedean point could have been given by traditional epistemology (or by philosophy, for that matter), upon which one could evaluate and – in the best case scenario – drive progress in science, was later interpreted as an eliminativist program in epistemology, where elimination meant the elimination of normative aspect of epistemology. Naturalizing epistemology, this interpretation asserts, is tantamount to rejecting the very core of what gives epistemology any sense at all. Therefore, it is tantamount to rejecting epistemology altogether (and with it, philosophy!).

[10] QUINE, 1969, p.71.
[11] QUINE, 1969, p.72.

Jaegwon Kim brings out this interpretation in his text of 1988, "What is 'Naturalized Epistemology"'. He tells us:

> Quine's stress in on *factual* and *descriptive* character of his program; he says, 'Why not see how [the construction of theory from observation] *actually proceeds*? Why not settle for psychology?'; again, 'Better to *discover how science is in fact developed and learned than* […]' We are given to understand that in contrast traditional epistemology is not a descriptive, factual inquiry. Rather, it is an attempt at a 'validation' or 'rational reconstruction' of science. Validation, according to Quine, proceeds via deduction, and rational reconstruction via definition. However, their *point* is justificatory — that is, to rationalize our sundry knowledge claims. So Quine is asking us to set aside what is 'rational' in rational reconstruction.
> Thus, it is normativity that Quine is asking us to repudiate[12].

Kim wants us to conclude that, if this is what Quine is asking for, then he is asking us to give up epistemology altogether, since: "For epistemology to go out of the business of justification is for it to go out of business"[13]. But why should this be so? Why would normativity be inherent to epistemology and incompatible with Quine's naturalism? The problem, it seems, lies in the way normativity is thought to play a role in knowledge, rather than in Quine's refusal of the role of normativity in epistemology. Since normativity is a fact in our cognitive activities inasmuch as it falls within ethics, a comparison Kim uses in his favor (and a statement that Quine would have no reason to disagree with), the query seems not to be whether epistemology has to deal with normativity, but rather *how* it should do just that. If normativity is part of what it means to know anything, in the sense that the cognizer commits herself to what she knows, demands from others concordance, and does so in good faith, i. e. with a sincere attitude and on the basis of the best grounds known to her, which she may agree are not absolute,

[12] KIM, 1988, p.388.
[13] KIM, 1988, p.391.

then epistemology, naturalized or not, should deal with the phenomenon of normativity. The disagreement, however, emerges regarding the way epistemology can fulfil the task of explaining knowledge, and in particular regarding the way a naturalized epistemology should deal with normativity. For Kim, Quine's path is unacceptable:

> The nomological patterns that Quine urges us to look for are certain to vary from species to species, depending on the particular way each biological (and possibly non-biological) species processes information, but the evidential relation in its proper normative sense must abstract from such factors and concern itself only with the degree to which evidence supports hypothesis[14].

The problem, which hopefully by now is obvious, is that a norm relative to the process by which the cognizer, whether human or another animal, acquiesces with it, is not a norm worth the name. A norm must be objective in the sense that it could not be, were it the mere result of a causal process. Let's turn to Kim once again:

> In any event, the concept of evidence is inseparable from that of justification. When we talk of 'evidence' in an epistemological sense we are talking about justification: one thing is 'evidence' for another just in case the first tends to enhance the reasonableness or justification of the second. And such evidential relations hold in part because of the 'contents' of the items involved, not merely because of the causal or nomological connections between them. A strictly non normative concept of evidence is not our concept of evidence; it is something that we do not understand[15].

Now, compare Quine's assertion, which we saw above, with what Kim is saying here. While Quine tells us that "[t]he doctrinal studies are concerned with establishing laws by proving them, some

[14] KIM, 1988, p.390.
[15] KIM, 1988, p.390s.

on the basis of others"[16], and concludes that this is exactly what is hopeless in epistemology, Kim claims that "[w]hen we talk of 'evidence' in an epistemological sense we are talking about justification: one thing is 'evidence' for another just in case the first tends to enhance the reasonableness or justification of the second". Kim concludes just what Quine refuses, namely that the doctrinal part of epistemology is exactly what is essential to it.

From this point of view, foundationalism about providing justifications for enforced norms, epistemic norms in this case, could even be compatible with naturalism, so long as naturalism could incorporate a justification, no matter whether on the basis of casual or nomological connections. Kim explicitly accepts this by discussing other naturalistic projects in epistemology. He maintains, for instance, that projects like that of Kitcher[17], in which "[j]ustification is to be characterized in terms of *causal* or *nomological* connection involving beliefs as *psychological states* or *process*es*,* and not in terms of the *logical* properties or relations pertaining to the contents of these beliefs"[18], should be seen as part of the Cartesian tradition rather under Quine's conception of a naturalized epistemology. Kim's move is not naïve. As I have pointed out, what he really has in mind and what really characterizes foundationalism is a kind of normative stance that Quine rejects. We can turn to Kim one last time:

> For, as we saw, the difference that matters between Quine's epistemological program and the traditional program is the former's total renouncement of the latter's normativity, its rejection of epistemology *as a normative inquiry*[19].

The query, therefore, it is important to emphasise, does not really concern the inclusion or exclusion of normativity as a proper matter

[16] QUINE, 1969, p.69s.
[17] Cfr. KITCHER, 1987.
[18] KIM, 1988, p.396.
[19] KIM, 1988, p.397, my italics.

of investigation by epistemology, be it naturalized or not, but rather the normative task the epistemologist considers herself committed to while doing her job. Once the epistemologist finds an evidential relation that holds, be it because of some causal or nomological connections or be it because an inferential justification, it is part of her job to take it as a norm and to use it as such, which means to derive consequences from it with the proper authority a norm demands. As such, hidden behind the defence of the normative in epistemology is not a plea for investigating the normative aspect of knowledge, but an impetus to exert normative authority on the basis of epistemological findings. But this is exactly what Quine was defending, and what is doomed to fail. Epistemologists should give up their impetus to be doctrinaires.

To ask epistemologists not to be normativists, Kim holds, would be the same as asking ethicists not to derive norms from their work. This analogy may help Quinean naturalism when used the other way around, though. One could sustain, and I am willing to do so, that under a naturalistic perspective, ethicists, as much as epistemologists, had better give up the drive to being moralists. For the same reason that epistemology should give up its doctrinal part, ethics should do the same. A naturalized ethics does not eliminate normativity as an object of investigation, but must refrain from deriving from what it learns from the phenomenon of moral normativity among humans, and from other animal, prescriptions of a higher status than those generated by causal and nomological processes that could be investigated by sciences, from sociology, to psychology, and evolutionary biology. Politicians (in a broad sense) may like to use allegedly better-justified principles and values for their own goals, but what works in public dispute is politics, not the normative force we might naively think is anchored in the soundness of a system of moral beliefs. And while politics may work despite clearly justified bases, this might not be so bad after all, considering the degree of certainty that the human cognitive enterprise has achieved so far.

Now, if for the sake of argument we assume that things are the way a Quinean naturalism says they are, than a good question for science would be why the threat of chaos isn't realised, either in science or ethics, if epistemologists and ethicists give up the drive to create doctrine. Why is there are enough agreement between human beings concerning their representations of the world and their moral values that they have been able to develop, for instance, language, science, and societies? Quine's suggestion regarding how we might investigate such questions is the following:

> This rubbing out of boundaries [between epistemology and the natural sciences] could contribute to progress, […] in philosophically interesting inquiries of a scientific nature. One possible area is perceptual norms. […] there is probably only a rather limited alphabet of perceptual norms altogether, toward which we tend to unconsciously to rectify all perceptions. These, if experimentally identified, could be taken as epistemological building blocks, the working elements of experience. They might prove in part to be culturally variable, as phonemes are, and in part universal[20].

Quine finishes his essay by exalting the role evolution could play in helping to explain induction in terms of its survival value. *Mutatis mutandis*, a naturalized ethics, could benefit enormously from moving closer to the sciences, a move that has been taken by moral philosophers in recent years[21].

Now, to return to our starting point, normativity has proven crucial to understanding why naturalism is a hard bullet for philosophers to bite, even those from the analytic tradition[22]. A naturalism without a doctrinal part has no special role to award philosophy, no role better than that already played by science,

[20] QUINE, 1969, p.90.
[21] Cfr. for instance: PRINZ, 2003; KNOB & NICHOLS, 2008; GREENE, 2002, 2003; HAID, 2012.
[22] For a discussion on varieties of naturalism look on: COPP, 2012.

anyway[23]. If one accepts this and takes normativity as an object of investigation, naturalism is not opposed to philosophy and by solving the problem of normativity philosophy can only profit from playing a role alongside other sciences.

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[23] Cfr. BRITO, 2013.

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